Pir, shaikh and Prophet: The personalisation of religious authority in Ahmad Riza Khan’s life

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Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921), a Sunni Muslim jurisconsult (mufti) and writer of voluminous legal rulings (fatāwā) over the course of approximately forty years from the 1880s to his death in 1921, was also a Sufi preceptor (pir) to his followers. During his lifetime, and subsequently, he has been revered by his followers as the pre-eminent leader of a movement known as the ‘Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jamā’at’ (‘People of the [Prophetic] Way and the Majority Community’). Detractors, of which there were many in the Indo-Muslim world (chiefly, though not exclusively, persons associated with the Dar ul-‘ulum at Deoband), have since the late 19th century disputed the implicit claim to universality that this term makes. Instead, they have labelled Ahmad Riza’s followers ‘Barelwi’, after Ahmad Riza’s patronymic which derives from his lifetime residence in Bareilly, now in west Uttar Pradesh (earlier known as Rohilkhand).

Taking seriously the movement’s claim to be engaged in religious reform (tajdid) on the prophetic model, I refer to it by its own term. Tajdid, however, held very different meanings for Ahmad Riza and his followers than it did for the Deobandis. In this paper I explore the Sufi dimensions of the movement, focusing in particular on the nature of religious authority in Ahmad Riza’s life from three perspectives: Ahmad Riza’s devotion to his pir, and his view on the nature of a pir’s relationship with, and authority over, his disciples generally; his devotion to Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani, the founder of the Qadiri order of Sufis, with which he identified more closely than with other orders, though he was also affiliated with the

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Chishti, Naqshbandi and Suhrawardi orders; and finally, the place of the Prophet as a pivotal figure in his life.

Devotion to the three figures of *pir*, *shaikh*¹ and Prophet was central to Ahmad Riza as believer and to his perception of what it meant to be a ‘good Muslim’. Nor were they unrelated to each other in his life: His writings make clear that each is a pathway, and a guide, to the next. The culmination of religious authority, in the world of men, is the Prophet.

One of the chief sources I will be drawing upon in this paper is Ahmad Riza’s *Malfūzāt*, the collection of orally delivered homilies and responses to questions posed by followers, that was compiled by his son, Mustafa Riza Khan (d. 1981). Important, too, in this context is Ahmad Riza’s *diwān*, or anthology of poetry, entitled *Hadā’iq-e Bakhshish*. The poems, which deal for the most part with the qualities of the Prophet, often have a simplicity and directness that give us additional insight into Ahmad Riza as believer. There is also an extensive collection of *fatāwā* by him on these themes. Indeed, this genre constituted Ahmad Riza’s hallmark. In this paper, some of the relevant *fatāwā* will be drawn upon as necessary.

I

The role of the *pir* in Ahmad Riza’s life

Ahmad Riza received *bā’i’a*, or initiation into discipleship, from Shah Al-e Rasul of Marahra in 1877, two years before the latter’s death. Ahmad Riza’s own personal recollections and record of his *pir* are rather limited in content, which is understandable in the circumstances. Ahmad Riza was about 21 at the time; Shah Al-e Rasul in his 80s. Nor does Ahmad Riza appear to have spent any length of time studying under his direction; indeed, it is related in the *Sirat-e A’la Hazrat* that he was ready for discipleship immediately he met Shah Al-e Rasul, and did not need the forty-day period of instruction which was customary prior to an initiation.²

The lack of a close personal relationship is also indicated, I believe, by the fact that there is no mention, in Ahmad Riza’s *Malfūzāt* or in the biographies

I am deliberately using the term ‘*shaikh*’ here to denote the founder of one of the major Sufi orders, as distinct from a personal *pir*, although the two terms are generally used interchangeably. This appears to be the only way of making the distinction between two entirely different levels of belief and ritual practice.

² Hasnain Riza Khan (1986: 55). While the hagiographical literature sees this lack of a period of instruction as a sign of Ahmad Riza’s high attainments, and gives him centre stage as it were in this event, the decision to seek *bā’i’a* from Shah Al-e Rasul was probably made by Naqi ‘Ali, Ahmad Riza’s father, on Maulana ‘Abd ul-Qadir Badayuni’s advice. Naqi ‘Ali and Ahmad Riza did not know Shah Al-e Rasul personally. Why did ‘Abd ul-Qadir, who was also a *pir*, not make father and son his own disciples? I think it probable that they had expressed a wish to become disciples of a Sayyid, which he, as a descendant of an ‘Usmani family, was not.
of him, of dreams in which his pīr appeared to him, although he reported having seen a wide variety of people in his dreams, including his father, his grandfather, and the Prophet (Mustafa Riza Khan n.d.: Vol. 1, 83, Vol. 3, 68–69). As an adult, Ahmad Riza was to receive instruction from, and seek the advice of, Nuri Miyan, Shah Al-e Rasul’s sajjāda-nīshīn (successor) and grandson, who was about fifteen years his senior. Ahmad Riza respected Nuri Miyan as his pīr’s sajjāda-nīshīn and reportedly had a close personal relationship with him.

Despite the fact that Ahmad Riza did not have such a relationship with Shah Al-e Rasul, the latter held a special place of honour and regard in his life. This is clear from the fact that, from about 1905 or 1906 until his death in 1921, Ahmad Riza annually commemorated Shah Al-e Rasul’s ‘urs (death anniversary) at his own home in Bareilly. For three days each year, from the 16th to the 18th Zu’l Hijja, the occasion was observed, in a spirit of both solemnity and devotion, with complete readings (khātma) of the Qur’an, recitation of na’t poetry honouring the Prophet, and sermons by the ‘ułamā. The highlight of the proceedings was the sermon (wa’z, bayān) delivered by Ahmad Riza, in which he spoke feelingly and eloquently (so the reports tell us) on a particular āyāt (verse) of the Qur’an, Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani, and the Prophet (see, for example, Dabdaba-e Sikandari, 45: 50 [10 January 1910], 9; 46: 50 [26 December 1910], 12–13; 47: 51 [18 December 1911]). Evidently, Ahmad Riza was an effective and powerful speaker, for the reports never fail to mention the religious transport and ecstasy of his listeners. One writer reported:

Everyone was completely captivated [by his wa’z]. Sometimes he makes you laugh, sometimes he makes you cry, sometimes he makes you feel agitated.

He continued:

If you want to hear the true praises of the Prophet, you must hear them from the lips of A’la Hazrat [Ahmad Riza]. The qualities with which he has been blessed by God make it clear that he is the mujaddid of the present century . . . . And at a time when such turbid fissures are opening up [among Sunnis], A’la Hazrat is a shield and a chisel.3

Others have reported, as well, on the eloquence of Ahmad Riza’s sermons, and the huge crowds he drew (Bihari, 1938: Vol. 1, 97–98, 114).

It is noteworthy, in view of the fact that Shah Al-e Rasul died soon after Ahmad Riza became his disciple, that Ahmad Riza did not consider his

3 Dabdaba-e Sikandari, 46: 29 (1 August 1910), 6. The occasion for this wa’z was an ‘urs-e Nuri at Marahra. A mujaddid is a renewer of the religious law, who seeks to ensure that the shari‘a is implemented and followed in people’s lives. The effort of renewal is tajdid.
relationship with the pîr, or with the Barkatiyya family, to have ended with this event. His relationship of discipleship appeared instead to embrace the Barkatiyya ancestors of Shah Al-e Rasul, and Nuri Miyan his sajjâda-nîshîn, and to continue in time beyond his death. In a sense Ahmad Riza’s relation with Shah Al-e Rasul transcended Shah Al-e Rasul himself, reaching beyond him to the chain of spiritual (and actual) ancestors who were the source of his spiritual authority. The source of their authority, in turn, was in the final analysis their descent from the Prophet. The shajara or family tree, in which one’s ancestors were listed by name down to oneself, was an important testimonial of authority linking its bearer to the Prophet. Ahmad Riza has a poem in his dîwân in which he traces his spiritual descent from the Prophet, through such eminent figures as ‘Ali, Husain, ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani, and his pîr Shah Al-e Rasul.  

In his Malfîzât, Ahmad Riza illustrated the point that a person’s relationship with his (or her) pîr reaches back to the pîr’s own pîr, and so on, with a story about a poor man (faqîr) who asked a shopkeeper for alms. When the shopkeeper refused, the faqîr began to shout at him, and threatened to turn his shop upside down. This caused a crowd to gather around them. In the crowd was a man of vision who pleaded with the shopkeeper to accede to the faqîr’s demands. He told the crowd that he had looked into the faqîr’s heart, to find out whether there was anything there. I found it empty. Then I looked into his pîr’s heart, and found that empty as well. I looked at his pîr’s pîr. I found him to be a man of Allah. And I saw that he was standing by and waiting, wondering when the faqîr would finally carry out his threat. What had happened was that the faqîr was holding on tightly to his pîr’s garment (dâman).  

The story conjures up an eloquent picture of a continuous chain of sufî pîrs watching over the affairs of their disciples’ disciples, many generations removed from them. Clearly, Ahmad Riza did not believe that the relationship of a murîd to his pîr ended at the latter’s death.  

On one occasion, Ahmad Riza (1901: 9) was asked for a fatwa in answer to the question, why should a Muslim who had grown up in a Sunni home, and had the Qur’an and the hadîs to guide him in his daily affairs, seek a pîr? This was an important question, for it raised doubts about a human being’s very need for discipleship. Ahmad Riza responded by saying that

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6 Indeed, it appears that the impending death of a pîr causes large numbers of people to seek bai’a from him before it is too late. See later.
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the Qur’an and hadīs contain everything: shari‘at (the law), tarīqat (the Sufi path), and haqīqat (truth), the greatest of these being the shari‘at. However, knowledge of the shari‘at has been handed down from one generation of scholars (mujahīds, those qualified to interpret the shari‘at, and ‘ulama) to another; had this not been so, ordinary people would have had no way of knowing right from wrong action. This being the case with matters related to the shari‘at, it is even more vital that there be a similar chain (silsila) for the transmission of gnostic knowledge (ma‘rifat), for this cannot be extracted from the Qur’an and hadīs without a teacher (murshid). To try to do so is to embark on a dark road, and be misled along the way of Satan.

But even if one is not seeking gnostic knowledge for its own sake, Ahmad Riza continued, one needs a pīr for a different, and more fundamental, reason: Without a pīr one cannot reach Allah. The Qur’an commands one to seek a means (wasila) to reach Him. This means is the Prophet. And the means to reach the Prophet are the mashā‘ikh (pl. of shaikh). It is absurd to imagine that one can have access to Allah without an intermediary; as for the Prophet, access to him is difficult (dushār; though presumably not impossible) without one. Ahmad Riza added that hadīs prove that there is a chain of intercession to God that starts with the Prophet interceding with Allah Himself. At the next level, the mashā‘ikh intercede with the Prophet on behalf of their followers; they do this in all situations and circumstances, including the grave (qabr). It would be foolish in the extreme, therefore, for one not to bind oneself to a pīr and thus ensure help in times of need (Ahmad Riza Khan, 1901: 12).

Finally, Ahmad Riza argued that union with the Prophet (through the succession of pīrs to whom one is related by means of one’s own pīr) is a matter of grace (baraka), in itself no small thing. If one’s chain of transmission is through pīrs and mashā‘ikh of eminence, this is all to the good in terms of the baraka that accrues to oneself. In this regard allegiance to Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani (founder of the Qadiri order of Sufis) is better than allegiance to other Sufi founders, for he is said to protect the welfare of his murīds in all situations.

Ahmad Riza’s Malfūzāt also contain references to the relationship that should obtain between a pīr and his murīd, and the conditions which should guide a person in choosing a pīr. He emphasised the importance of having the right intention or inner desire (irāda), for without this the relationship would be sterile, and ‘nothing would happen’. The pīr’s ability to guide his disciple was thus in part dependent on the disciple’s purity of intention and his faith in him. The tie between them was indissoluble, and irreplaceable (Mustafa Riza Khan n.d.: Vol. 3, 59–60). As Ahmad Riza

7 Ahmad Riza Khan (1901: 9–11). This is based on a hadīs that says: ‘When someone has no shaikh, Satan becomes his shaikh’. Cf. Schimmel (1975: 103).
put it memorably on one occasion, 'the fact in that the Ka’ba is the qibla of
the body, and the pîr is the qibla of the soul.'

A disciple attains supreme closeness to his pîr in the condition of fanâ
fi’l-shaikh, or total absorption in one’s pîr. Once a disciple has attained
this, Ahmad Riza explained, he will never be separated from his pîr,
regardless of the circumstances. The pîr is there to guide and admonish him
at all times. Ahmad Riza related the story of one such case to his followers:

Hafiz ul-Hadis Sayyid Ahmad Sujalmasi was going somewhere. Suddenly
his eyes lifted from the ground, and he saw a beautiful woman. The
glance had been inadvertent [and so no blame attached to him]. But
then he looked up again. This time he saw his pîr and murshid, Sayyid
2, 45).

Given the importance of one’s pîr, Ahmad Riza advised his followers to
choose carefully. A pîr should fulfil four exacting standards. He must be a
Sunni of good faith (sahîh ‘aqîdah). Further, he must be an ‘âlim or scholar,
one who has sufficient knowledge of the Law to solve his own problems
and answer his own questions without having to ask someone else to
interpret the shari’ah for him. Third, the chain of transmission (silsi’ah)
should reach back from him, without a single break, to the Prophet. And
finally, he should lead an exemplary life, and not be disobedient or wicked
in his personal habits (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 2, 41).

One sees here, as in other writings by Ahmad Riza, the emphasis on
following the shari’ah which was also characteristic of the pîrs of Marahra.
In his Mafûzât, he related several stories pointing out that ignorant Sufis,
who have no knowledge of fiqh (jurisprudence), mistake Satan for God
without knowing that they do so:

There was a wali [Sufi ‘friend of God’] who made large claims for
himself. An ascetic heard about him. He called the wali and asked him
what he could do. The wali said he saw Khuda [God] every single day.
Every day Khuda’s canopy [‘arsh] spread itself on the ocean and Khuda
appeared on it. Now, if he had had knowledge, he would have known that
it is impossible [muhâl] in this world to see Khuda, that this was
something given only to the Prophet. At any rate, the ascetic called
someone and asked him to read the hadîs in which the Prophet said that
Iblis spreads his throne [takht] over the ocean. [When this had been
done, the so-called wali] understood that all this time he had mistaken
Satan for God, had been prostrating himself before Satan, had been

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8 Mustafa Riza Khan (n.d.: Vol. 2, 65). The Ka’ba is the cube-shaped building in Mecca’s
Grand Mosque in whose direction Muslims face to pray, while the qibla is the direction of
prayer (i.e., facing the Ka’ba).
worshipping him. He rent his clothes and vanished into a forest (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 3, 22–23).

II

Ahmad Riza as personal ṭīr

Ahmad Riza himself, while primarily an ‘ālim, specifically a muṭṭī whose opinion was frequently sought on a wide range of issues, was ṭīr to a small number of disciples.\(^9\) He founded the silsilā Rizwiyya,\(^10\) and in November 1915 ensured its continuity by appointing his elder son, Hamid Riza Khan, as his sajjāda-nishīn. The ceremony took place on the last day of the annual ‘urs celebration that year for Shah Al-e Rasul (Dabdaba-e Sikandari, 51: 51 [8 November 1915], 3). Ahmad Riza placed his robe (khirqa), received from Shah Al-e Rasul, on Hamid Riza’s shoulders, and his own turban (‘imāma) on his head, before reading the sanad (authority) of the sajjāda-nishīn in Arabic and Urdu. After his death in 1921, his disciples and followers affirmed their allegiance to Hamid Riza as his sajjāda-nishīn.\(^11\)

In addition to his small circle of murīds, Ahmad Riza had a much larger circle of khalīfās. Some of these, such as Na‘īm ud-Dīn Muradabadi and Didar ‘Ali Alwari, were prominent leaders of the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jamā’at movement in the 1920s.\(^12\) Many came to him from different parts of north India (central India, in the case of Burhan ul-Haqq Jabbalpuri, who, however, was a murīd) toward the end of their course of studies, attracted to him by his growing reputation for scholarship and for the particular point of view he espoused. The term ‘khillāfat’ as it applied to these and other men did not necessarily denote a relationship of discipleship to Ahmad Riza. It was a loosely applied term, usually, it would appear, an honorific that Ahmad Riza bestowed on those he wished to honour in this way. Granting khilāfat was an individual and public act, undertaken from

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\(^9\) It is virtually impossible to estimate who these were, and how many. In addition to this two sons, Hamid Riza Khan and Mustafa Riza Khan, the names of a few others are known, such as Haji Kifayat Ullah, and Hafiz Yaqīn ud-Dīn Qadiri. The difficulty with identifying Ahmad Riza’s disciples is that the names cited in the literature are often of khalīfās rather than murīds. The difference between the two will be discussed later. See Bihari (1938: 139–40); Hasnain Riza Khan (1986: 124, 132).

\(^10\) By ‘silsilā’ is here meant a chain of discipleship that culminates in a particular ṭīr, not a Sufi order. The name Rizwi or Rizwiyya is derived from the ‘Rizvā’ in Ahmad Riza’s name. A person who wrote ‘Rizwi’ after his name (probably as part of a string of epithets, written in descending order of Importance, such as ‘Sunni Hanafi Qadiri Rizwi Barelwi’) would be signalling the ṭīr to whom he bore allegiance.

\(^11\) This occurred in the course of ceremonies marking the fortieth day of Ahmad Riza’s death, on 8 December 1921. While I have not seen an account of the event, an announcement that this was intended was made by Hamid Riza and Mustafa Riza in Dabdaba-e Sikandari, 58: 13 (28 November 1922), 5.

\(^12\) See Mas’ud Ahmad (1987: 11) for a partial listing of Ahmad Riza’s khalīfās.
time to time. Thus the Dabdaba-e Sikandari reported in January 1910 that on the third and last day of the ‘urs for Shah Al-e Rasul at Ahmad Riza’s house that year, Ahmad Riza bestowed the title of khilīfa on Maulana Zafar ud-Din Bihari by tying a turban (the dastār-e khilīfat) on his head. Zafar ud-Din fell at his feet, and Ahmad Riza responded by giving him some ‘necessary counsel’ (nasīhat) (Dabdaba-e Sikandari, 45: 50 [10 January 1910], 9).

Ahmad Riza explained the difference between a khilīfa and a murīd by saying that there are two kinds of khilīfat, the ordinary (‘āmm) and the special (khāss) (Ahmad Riza Khan, 1901: 14). The first kind obtains when a murshid (teacher) chooses to make someone he considers worthy (lā‘iq), whether a student of his or a follower, his khalīfa and deputy (nā’ib). The teacher guides his khalīfa in matters related to Sufism (azkār, ashghāl, aurād, a‘māl). The ‘position’ (masnād) is of religious (dīnī) significance alone, and there is no limit to the number of khalīfas that he may choose to have. This relationship ceases upon the death of the teacher. By contrast, in the second kind of khilīfat, the khāss or special one, the khalīfa continues in this role even after his murshid’s death. The relationship is special because the khalīfa in this case is his murshid’s sajjāda-nishīn, a position to which only one person may be appointed. In contrast, again, with the first kind, here the role carries worldly responsibilities for the maintenance of properties. Ahmad Riza went on to say that this position usually devolves upon the murshid’s eldest son, though various sharī‘i conditions may obtain to alter the situation (ibid.: 15–21).

However, this two-fold distinction between the sajjāda-nishīn on the one hand, and a large number of khalīfas on the other, does not convey the diversity of possible relationships between a murshid and his murīds or khalīfas. On examination, it appears that the relationship between a murshid and his murīd was not always as close or as intense as has been described above. In Ahmad Riza’s own case, shortly before his death a large number of men and women came forward to take ba‘ī‘a at his hands; so many that he had to deputise his two sons, Hamid Riza and Mustafa Riza, to officiate on his behalf (Hasnain Riza Khan 1986: 124). Obviously, those who became his murīds at this time did not enjoy a special relationship with him; nor, probably, had they made the careful and thoughtful choice that he had advised. These murīds do not fit the picture of one who was giving of him or herself to the pīr in the total sense that is described in the literature, including Ahmad Riza’s Malfuzāt. What had probably attracted them to him was the baraka that he, as a learned, upright and renowned pīr (and ‘ālim), was believed to possess. Nevertheless, the term used in this case is also ‘ba‘ī‘a’.

Conversely, Ahmad Riza’s relations with his khalīfas were not as distant as may appear from his two-fold categorization into ordinary and special. His relations with them appear to have been rather loosely structured,
individual and diverse. He was their murshid in the informal sense that they respected him greatly, and sought to promote the same ends as he in their own lives; but they did not necessarily live in Bareilly or take instruction from him. Na'im ud-Din Muradabadi (1882–1948), one of Ahmad Riza's khālijās, was a forceful personality. He had already built up a reputation for disputation against 'Wahhabis'13 and Arya Samajis in Muradabad before he came to Ahmad Riza's attention on account of an article he had written in a local newspaper (Na'imi 1959: 6–7). He neither studied under Ahmad Riza's direction, nor took bai'a from him, though Ahmad Riza's writings and point of view had influenced his thinking before they met. Once the two men got to know each other, Na'im ud-Din was a frequent visitor at Bareilly, and Ahmad Riza would summon him from time to time to represent the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jam'at at debates in different parts of the country. For the rest, he was busy writing and debating, and in 1919–20 he set up a madrasā (seminary) in Muradabad (ibid.: 7–10, 20). The relationship between Ahmad Riza and Na'im ud-Din, then, was to a large degree that of intellectual companions, Na'im ud-Din respecting Ahmad Riza as the older and more widely-read 'ālim.

On a day-to-day basis, Ahmad Riza interacted with a diffuse set of people who sought his advice on all kinds of matters, great and small. Some hours in the late afternoon were set aside for this purpose. As with Nuri Miyan, an important function Ahmad Riza performed vis-à-vis this wide circle of followers was that of curing or healing. A man who came to him asking for a prayer (du'ā) because he was beset with problems, was told:

A sahābi [companion] went to the Prophet and said, the world has turned its back on me. He said, Don't you remember that tasbīh [prayer of praise] praising the angels, by the baraka of which we receive our daily food? Good fortune will come to you after your distress. At the time of the fājr prayer of sunrise, repeat this prayer (‘Subbah Allah bi-hamdihi subhan allah al-azim wa bi-hamdihi astaghfir Allah’). Seven days after the Prophet had given the sahābi this advice, the sahābi returned. His fortune had changed so much, he said, that he didn't know how to describe it. You too [Ahmad Riza addressed the man] should repeat this prayer. If you miss the time of sunrise, say it in the morning after joining the congregation at the fājr prayer. And if some day you miss saying it even then, say it before sunrise [of the following day] (Mustafa Riza Khan n.d.: Vol. 1, 62).

The solution to a problem was not always that simple, however. When a

13 A term used by the Ahl-e Sunnat in a loosely-defined sense to include the 'ulamā' of the Tariqa-e Muhammadiyya, Deoband, and Ahl-e Hadis, as well as modernist Muslim intellectuals such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan.
man came to him saying that after many years of childlessness, he had had six children only to lose five of them, and that he now had only a three-year-old daughter left, Ahmad Riza gave the following detailed advice:

Next time you are expecting a baby, come here and tell me within two months of conception. Also tell me your wife’s and her mother’s names. Thereafter, insha’ilah, arrangements will be made. Make sure everyone in your household is punctilious in offering namáz, and after every namáz the Ayat al-Kursi should be repeated . . . . And apart from the namáz, the Ayat al-Kursi should be repeated thrice a day—before sunrise, before sundown, and at bedtime. Even women who don’t have permission to say the namáz [i.e., are menstruating] should repeat this āyat. But on such days they should say it with the intention not of repeating an āyat of the Qur’an but of praising Allah. And on the days that they are permitted to read the namáz, they should also read the qul three times thrice a day (before sunrise, before sunset, and before sleeping). [Detailed instructions on the position of the hands follow.] There is an elderly man here who makes large lamps (chirāgh). Get him to make you one, and light it from the time conception takes place right until the time of birth. As for the daughter you already have, if she gets ill, light a lamp for her as well. That lamp will guard against sorcery (sihr), misfortune (āseb) and disease. And as soon as a new child is born the āzān (call to prayer) should be repeated in its ear seven times, four times in the right ear and three times in the left. There should be absolutely no delay in doing this. If you delay, Satan enters [the child’s body]. For forty days after birth, the child should be weighed against grain, and [the equivalent weight of grain] given in alms. After that, this should be done once a month until it’s a year old; once every two months until it is two years old, and once every three months until it is three. In its fourth year, this should be done once every four months, and so too in its fifth year. In its sixth year, it should be done every six months. And from its seventh year on, once a year. Do this for your daughter as well. Since she is in her fourth year, weigh her every four months. Repeat the āzān out loud in her ear for seven days at maghrib, seven times on each occasion. And for three evenings, the Surat al-Baqara should be read by a qualified reader (khwān) in a loud voice that will reach every corner of the house. At night the door of the house should be shut while saying ‘Bism’illah’ and the same when opening the door in the morning. When going to the bathroom (pā-khāna), one should say the Bism’illah outside the door and enter with one’s left foot first. And when leaving, one should extend one’s right foot first. When taking off one’s clothes or bathing, one should say the Bism’illah first. And when approaching one another, both husband and wife should remember to say this first. If you observe all this advice, insha’ilah, no harm will befall you (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 3, 9–11).
Ahmad Riza’s lengthy response shows the seriousness with which he viewed the man’s problem. The ingredients of the cure were, essentially, simple ones: punctiliousness in observing the namāz, repetition of certain verses of the Qur’an (repetition of the Ayat al-Kursi being widespread as a cure), awareness of the details of every personal deed and of the correct way of performing it, and finally, the giving of alms on a large scale. A distinctive feature of his response, which recalls Denny’s comment that reciting the Qur’an is in a sense a magical act (1985: 76), was that reciting a verse of the Qur’an repeatedly would ward off the problem at hand.

This was very clear when, on another occasion, Ahmad Riza was asked whether one can receive grace (baraka) only after one dies, or whether one may begin to do so during one’s lifetime. In the course of his reply that grace may accrue to one both before and after death, Ahmad Riza alluded to Chapter 67 of the Qur’an, Sura al-Mulk,\(^{14}\) which, he explained, intercedes for the person who prays to it. The sūra was portrayed anthropomorphically in the female gender:

> Nothing exceeds this sūra’s ability to save [the dead] from the punishment of the grave and to convey peace and tranquillity. If the punishing angels wish to come to the reader of this sūra, she [the sūra] stops them from doing so. If they try to come from another direction, she hinders them from there. ‘He is reading me’, she says. The angels say, ‘We have come at His command, whose kalām [speech] you are.’ Then the sūra says, ‘Wait then, don’t come near him until I return.’ And the sūra puts up such a fight on behalf of the reader at Allah’s court, pleading for his pardon . . . . If there is a delay in the pardon being granted, she argues, ‘He used to read me, and You haven’t forgiven him. If I am not your kalām, tear me out of Your Book.’ The Lord replies, ‘Go. I have forgiven him.’ The sūra immediately goes to heaven. She collects silk cloths, pillows, flowers and perfumes from there, and brings them to the grave. ‘I got held up coming here’, she explains. ‘You didn’t get worried, I hope?’ And she spreads out the cloths and the pillows, while the angels, commanded by God, go away (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 1, 70–71).

While he attached considerable importance to the ‘magical’ as a cure to problems, Ahmad Riza also emphasised on numerous occasions the role of individual effort, and of internal ‘purity of heart’ and purpose in achieving the desired result.\(^{15}\) Just as a pīr could not by himself ensure the progress of the disciple unless the latter had the right ‘intention’, so also with the

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\(^{14}\) Referred to in the text as ‘Sura Tabaraka’, after the first word in the sūra. I am grateful to Christian W. Troll for identifying the sūra for me, in a personal communication.

\(^{15}\) The individual, he explained on another occasion, is composed of nafs (the base instincts), qaṣd (‘heart’ in a metaphoric sense), and rūḥ (spirit) (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 3, 63). For a discussion of the background of this tripartite division in Sufi thought, see Schimmel (1975: 191–92). For the importance of ‘intention’ in Sufism, see Padwick (1961: 52–54).
removal of obstacles. If the seeker was pure of heart, Allah never failed him. Ahmad Riza cited a hadīs qudsi (Divine Saying) in which Allah is reported to have said, ‘... And if he draws nearer to Me by a handbreadth, I draw nearer to him by an arm's length; and if he draws nearer to Me by an arm's length, I draw near to him by a fathom; and if he comes to Me walking, I come to him running.’ Clearly, though, the onus was on the individual to make the first move toward Allah before he could be helped.

In the same vein, Ahmad Riza cautioned his listeners not to undertake the fast or the hajj, or go into seclusion toward the end of Ramazan (e'tikāf), for the wrong reasons: they must perform these deeds for Allah, not for themselves, although good would come to them as a result of having done them (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 1, 29–30). And when judging the actions of others, they must be careful not to entertain doubts about others’ sincerity as long as a possibility existed that they were well-intentioned (ibid.: Vol. 2, 91, 93). One had constantly to be watchful over one’s heart, which was ever given to disobedience (ma’āṣī) and bid’at (reprehensible innovation). A time could come when a person became completely blind to the truth (ibid.: Vol. 3, 63).

The Malfūzāt reveal the wide range of questions that Ahmad Riza dealt with in these daily conversations. Some related to personal appearance, such as the permissibility or otherwise of dyeing one’s hair black, wearing one’s hair long if one were a man, or wearing rings of various metals (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 2, 102; Vol. 3, 2). Others related to ritual practice, such as the correct manner of performing wuzu’ (ablution) before prayer, the performance of the prayer itself, or the adab (etiquette) to be observed in mosque (ibid.: Vol. 2, 88–89, 108–12). Sometimes conversation turned to marital relations, or to relations with non-Muslims (ibid.: Vol. 2, 86, 97; Vol. 3, 44). Beliefs about the dead, their intercession with the Prophet on behalf of the living, the Prophet’s knowledge of the unseen: All these and other matters were discussed repeatedly. These daily conversations with people in the neighbourhood, town, and region in and around Bareilly must have been an important factor in Ahmad Riza’s growth of influence and stature over the years. Although we have no way of knowing, his audience probably included some who were illiterate, on whom Ahmad Riza’s advice and display of learning may have had a particularly powerful impact.17

In this examination of the nature of religious authority in Ahmad Riza’s life, particularly in reference to the role of the pīr that we have looked at so far, it is clear that Ahmad Riza himself exercised considerable personal

17 In this context see Robinson (1983: 194–95), wherein he refers to the ‘special chemistry of personal contact’ as a factor ‘spreading Islamic knowledge and bringing about a wider observance of Islamic law.’
religious authority over his followers, as his pîr and other scholarly and pious men did over him. What were the likely sources of this authority?

Simon Digby has addressed this question in relation to the Chishti shaikhs in the Sultanate period (12th and 13th centuries) (1986: 57–58). Digby looks at a range of personal attributes which, as sources of prestige, enhanced the reputation and standing of a pîr at that time. These could include: ‘learning and orthodoxy in conjunction with descent from the Prophet and . . . rank as a Sufi Shaikh’, ‘poetic sensibility’, and ‘the ability to construct, extend and organize a Khanqah [Sufi hospice]; to feed, accommodate and attend to the material and spiritual needs of disciples and often numerous dependants; and to accommodate travellers according to Muslim precept and the expectations of hospitality’ (ibid.: 61, 67). Most of these personal attributes (and Digby mentions others), with the exception of Sayyid ancestry, accurately describe Ahmad Riza as pîr. Zafar ud-Din Bihari, Ahmad Riza’s biographer, enumerates his qualities in a series of sub-heads throughout the Hayât-e A’la Hazrat, including, among others: Islamic equality, kindness toward the poor, generosity toward others, depth of learning, and vigilance in the observance of dîn (Bihari 1938: 40, 46, 50, 131, 181).

It should be pointed out, however, that these values applied in the particular context of Ahmad Riza’s vision of right belief and conduct. Zafar ud-Din sees no contradiction between ‘Islamic equality’, by which he means that Ahmad Riza treated people of low social status at par with those of high social standing, and Ahmad Riza’s proverbial respect for Sayyids, whom he treated with a deference accorded to no one else on account of their descent from the Prophet (Bihari 1938: 203–208). A small example of this was that Sayyids were given twice as much food at a milâd celebration (in honour of the Prophet’s birth anniversary) as other guests at Ahmad Riza’s household. Likewise, Ahmad Riza’s refusal to have anything to do with Shi‘is is interpreted as a sign of his uncompromising attitude in matters related to ‘mazhab’; Zafar ud-Din comments that people ignorant of dîn and shâr’ mistook Ahmad Riza’s mazhabi firmness for rudeness or harshness (ibid.: 189–92). ‘Wahhabis’ of various descriptions, whose views Ahmad Riza devoted a lifetime to rebutting, were also understood to be outside the circle of people to whom he extended a courteous welcome. In all that Ahmad Riza said and did, he drew a clear line of difference between right and wrong belief and action. This unambiguity, backed by his unquestioned erudition, was perhaps his greatest source of prestige and authority in his followers’ eyes.18

18 Zafar ud-Din Bihari’s use of the word ‘mazhab’ (Ar., madhhab) in this context is not strictly correct, for mazhab refers properly to the four main Sunni law schools of Hanafi, Shafi‘i, Hanbali, and Maliki. Shi‘ism is not, therefore, a mazhab. The word as used here is interchangeable with dîn, the faith.

III

Significance of Shaikh 'Abd ul-Qadir Jilani

The Qadiri order (tariqat) named after Shaikh 'Abd ul-Qadir Jilani Baghdadi (d. 1166) is more popular in the South Asian subcontinent than in any other part of the Muslim world apart from Iraq, its place of origin. Ewing writes that ‘Abdul Qadir Gilani... is regarded as the patron of all the sufi orders in South Asia’ (1980: 142). Among pilgrims to his tomb in Baghdad, South Asians outnumber those from other parts of the world (Schimmel 1975: 247). In the late 20th century, Pakistanis (and Iraqis) are the chief source of the authority of the keeper of ‘Abd ul-Qadir’s tomb at Baghdad. The Pakistanis ‘periodically send gifts which form the main source of the revenues of his establishment; the members of this family find it worthwhile to learn Urdu.’

‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani, who was born at Jilan in Iran, migrated to Baghdad as a young man. After spending several years in solitude as an ascetic, in the latter half of his life he decided to become a preacher. As a follower of the Hanbali school, he taught and preached at a madrasa of Hanbali Law, and also at a ribat or monastery. Both institutions were famous in 12th century Baghdad, and ‘Abd ul-Qadir was by all accounts very popular. His efforts as a preacher gained him the title ‘Muhayi ud-Din’ or ‘reviver of the faith’ which, allegedly, had grown weak at the time.

To the Qadris in the subcontinent, the founder of their order is known among other things (he has over ninety-nine names) as the ‘Ghaus-e A’zam’, or ‘Greatest Helper’. As the epithet ‘Helper’ or ‘Succourer’ suggests, he is viewed primarily as an intercessor with Allah. Padwick explains that ‘While the Shafa’i [intercession] of the Prophet is his people’s great hope for the life of the world to come, ['Abd ul-Qadir Jilani is an intercessor] concerning the life that now is’ (1961: 240). He occupies a pre-eminent position in the hierarchy of saints, as we shall soon see; in some of the prayer manuals that Padwick studied, in fact, it is claimed that Allah gave him a seat ‘with the spirits of the prophets... between this world and the next, between the Creator and the created...’, which claim, Padwick comments, ‘is remarkable, because entrance to that rank [that is, of the prophets] had been regarded as closed since the coming of Muhammad’ (ibid.).

20 Margoliouth, ‘Kadiriyya’, in EI2: 382. The article has presumably been updated since Margoliouth’s death, though the editor’s name is not indicated.
22 For a history of the Qadiri order in the subcontinent from the 15th century, when it was first introduced in that region, until the late 19th century, see Rizvi (1983: Vol. 2, ch. 2).
23 In this context, see also Rizvi’s comment that, ‘To all intents and purposes, the Qadriyyas advocated the deification of their founder and all his descendants’ (1983: Vol. 2, 54).
The personalisation of religious authority in Ahmad Riza Khan’s life

In this respect, Ahmad Riza’s views on ‘Abd ul-Qadir’s status vis-à-vis the Prophet and the other saints of the Sufi hierarchy were very clear. He definitely ranked him below the Prophet, but exalted him above all other saints. In one of his poems, he addressed ‘Abd ul-Qadir with these words:

Except for divinity and prophethood
you encompass all perfections, O Ghaus
(ulūhiyyat nubūwwat ke siwā tā
tamām afzal kā qābil hai yā ghaus)

Elsewhere he described how spiritual authority flows from Allah to the Shaikh:

From Ahad to Ahmad, from Ahmad to you
in this order the divine command ‘Be’ or ‘Don’t Be’ is followed, O Ghaus
(ahad se ahmad aur ahmad se tujh ko
kun aur sab kun makun hāsil hai yā ghaus) (ibid.: 249).25

As this verse suggests, ‘Abd ul-Qadir is seen to occupy the apex of spiritual authority below that of prophethood. Echoing the Shaikh’s famous saying that ‘My foot is on the neck of every saint’, Ahmad Riza writes:

Who is to know what your head looks like
as the eye level of other saints corresponds to the sole of your foot

(sar bhala kyā ko‘i jāne ki hai kaisā terā
auliya milte hain ânkhen wo hai talwā terā)
(ibid.: 233).26

For Qadiris he is the Ghaus, or the Qutb (Axis or Pole), ‘on whom the government of the world is believed to depend’ (Subhan 1970: 104). Ahmad Riza explained the invisible hierarchy of saints as follows:

Every ghaus has two ministers. The ghaus is known as ‘Abd Ullah. The minister on the right is called ‘Abd ur-Rab, and the one on the left is called ‘Abd-ul-Malik. In this [spiritual] world, the minister on the left is superior to the one on the right, unlike the worldly sultanat. The reason is that this is the sultanat of the heart and the heart is on the left side.

24 The reference here is to a different edition from the one cited in footnote 4 of this paper. Hereafter, n.d. or ‘1976 edn.’ will indicate which edition is being cited.
25 Ahad = The One, i.e., Allah; Ahmad = Muhammad.
26 This saying is extremely popular and widely known among Qadiris. For comments see, for example, Schimmel (1975: 247–48).
Every ghaus . . . [has a special relationship with] the Prophet (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 1, 102).

Ahmad Riza went on to name the succession of ghaus and their ministers from the time of the Prophet down to Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani. The first ghaus in this list was the Prophet, followed by the four khulafa-e rāshidūn (Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Usmān and ‘Ali), each of whom was in turn: first the minister of the left hand to the current ghaus, and at the latter’s death, replaced him in that position. They were followed by Hasan and Husain, down to Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani. The latter was the last occupant of the ‘Ghausiyat-e Kukrā’ (the Great Succourer[ship]), those who have followed have been, and will continue to be, deputes (nā’ib). Ultimately the Imam Mahdi will receive the Ghausiyat-e Kukrā (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 1, 102).

It is to be noted that in this scheme of things, the Prophet and the first four khulifas stand at the head of the spiritual hierarchy which ends in Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani. In this way the lines of succession by which spiritual, gnostic knowledge is handed down coincide with the ultimate sources of authority for knowledge of sharī‘a which, of course, also culminate in the Prophet.28 Ahmad Riza explicitly made this connection in one of his poems addressing the Shaikh:

You are mufti of the shar‘, qāzi of the community
and expert in the secrets of knowledge, ‘Abd ul-Qadir
(mufti-e shar‘ bhi hai qāzi-e millat bhi hai

‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani’s relationship with the Prophet was not merely one of spiritual lineage, however. It was also one of genealogical descent, for the Shaikh’s mother was a descendant of Husain, and his father of Hasan. This double genealogical link with the Prophet earned the Shaikh one of his many names, that of ‘Hasan al-Husain’ (Subhan 1970: 176). For Qadiri followers this genealogy was of great importance for, as S.A.A. Rizvi notes, ‘as a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (through his daughter, Fatima), Shaikh ‘Abdu’l Qadir was believed to have inherited every one of his ancestor’s spiritual achievements’ (1983: Vol. 2, 54).

27 Subhan (1970: 104–106) gives the details of this hierarchy, which is considerably more complex than this brief summary indicates. Schimmel suggests that the concept of the qutb (or ghaus, for the two terms are interchangeable) as ‘the highest spiritual guide of the faithful’ bears a structural resemblance to the Shi‘i concept of the hidden imām. See Schimmel (1975: 200).
28 Apparently, Ahmad Riza was here following a scheme outlined by ‘Ali al-Hujwiri, the 11th-century saint popularly known in the subcontinent as Data Ganj Bakhsh. See his Kashf al-Mahjūb.
Ahmad Riza’s poetry is again helpful in understanding the importance of this factor to him personally. In the following verses, Ahmad Riza uses metaphors from nature to describe the Shaikh. It should be understood that the words ‘pure’, ‘beautiful’, and ‘lovely’, stand for Fatima, Hasan, and Husain, respectively:

Prophetic shower, ‘Alawi9 season, pure garden
Beautiful flower, your fragrance is lovely
Prophetic shade, ‘Alawi constellation, pure station
Beautiful moon, your radiance is lovely
Prophetic sun, ‘Alawi mountain, pure quarry
Beautiful ruby, your brilliance is lovely

(\textit{nabawī menh, ‘alawi fasīl, batūli gulshan}
\textit{hasani phūl husainī hai mahakna tērā}
\textit{nabawī zil, ‘alawi burj, batūli manzil}
\textit{hasani chānd husainī hai ujāla tērā}
\textit{nabawī khur, ‘alawi koh, batūli ma‘adun}
\textit{hasani lā’l husainī hai tajallā tērā} (1976 edn.: 234)

These verses indicate that Ahmad Riza saw Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir as the repository of the virtues of each one of his illustrious ancestors, not only that of the Prophet. This is the clearest indication we have had so far of his belief that religious authority flows both spiritually and genealogically. Ahmad Riza’s choice of a Sayyid as his own pīr had already indicated the importance he attached to genealogical descent from the Prophet. Further evidence that spiritual authority is handed down genealogically was his nomination of his own eldest son for the sajjāda-nīshīni.

As with other holders of religious authority, ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani was a very real presence in Ahmad Riza’s personal life as lived from day to day. He told his followers of a time when the shaikh had answered his appeal for help during a visit he had made to Nizam ud-Din Auliya’s tomb in Delhi. The tomb was surrounded by musicians and singers, making what seemed to him ‘a great commotion’ and causing him much distress. Invoking Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir’s help with the words ‘Ya Ghaus’, he also addressed Nizam ud-Din, saying, ‘I have come to your court. Release me from this noise.’ As he entered the tomb, silence suddenly reigned. He thought the musicians had gone away, but as soon as he left the tomb, the noise returned in full swing. Then he knew that the Shaikh had answered his prayer.30

30 Mustafa Riza Khan (n.d.: Vol. 3, 59). Although Ahmad Riza had invoked the help of both Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir and Nizam ud-Din Auliya, he interpreted this event as a miracle (\textit{karāmat}) by Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir alone. The latter’s miracles are numerous. Many are recorded in the secondary literature in English.
‘Abd ul-Qadir was also a constant presence in his life in terms of ritual practice. This included saying the Fatiha in the Shaikh’s name when a wish was granted, and celebration of the Shaikh’s birthdate on the eleventh of every month, a ceremony known as gyâ rahwîn. Zafar ud-Din Bihari records an occasion when someone asked Ahmad Riza to read the Fatiha (the opening sûra of the Qur‘an) over some food, offered in the Shaikh’s name in thanksgiving:

[Ahmad Riza] first had everyone do wuzu’ [ritual ablution]. The food was placed in a room and everyone gathered together in it. They faced the direction of Baghdad which is eighteen degrees north of the qibla [Mekka]. Ahmad Riza directed everyone to say Bism‘illah, and to follow this up with the durûd Ghausia [prayer calling down God’s blessing on Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir], seven times. Then they were to read a formula [in praise of the Prophet] once, the al-hamd sharîf [giving thanks to God] once, the Ayat al-Kursi once, and repeat ‘Qul huwa Allahu Sharîf’ [Allah is one] seven times. After reading the durûd Ghausia thrice, they should offer nazar [the food] to the Sarkar-e Baghdad [‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani]. [After completing the reading] everyone said Bism‘illah [once more], and sat down to eat. When they had finished, Ahmad Riza told them not to wash their hands immediately, but to turn in the direction of Iraq and raise their hands to do du‘â [prayer of supplication for ‘Abd ul-Qadir]. He said, the Sâdât [pl. of Sayyid] are in the front row, in front of everyone else. After they had said the du‘â, everyone washed their hands carefully, as he instructed, and he moved the used water to a safe place, commanding each one to drink a little of it rather than rinse it out (Bihari 1938: 202–203).

It remains only to highlight once again the significance of the Qadiri order and its founder, Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani, to Ahmad Riza in terms of religious authority. Most importantly, the Shaikh was a means (wasîla) of intercession with the Prophet and thence with Allah, and he was seen, consequently, as a kindly, caring saint who has his petitioners’ interests at heart. His Sayyid ancestry, moreover, made him a perfect intercessionary agent, as religious authority was seen to flow through both spiritual and genealogical lines.

Indeed, it appears to me that we are now in a position to better understand the significance to Ahmad Riza of Sayyid ancestry. As many Muslims see it (and here I speak more generally), Sayyids are imbued with baraka or grace by virtue of their descent from the Prophet, and this quality may be passed on to others through contact with relics associated with them. When one considers that baraka is itself a source or expression of religious authority, it becomes apparent that Sayyids ‘automatically’ embody religious authority—though personal spiritual worth is of course also of great importance in determining how a man, or a pîr or shaikh, is evaluated. Zafar
ud-Din Bihari wrote in his biography that Ahmad Riza always looked upon Sayyids primarily as a ‘part of the Prophet’, and only secondarily saw their personal qualities. Consequently, it was inconceivable to him that a Sayyid could be placed in the socially inferior role of servitor: Sayyids were to be served, regardless of material or social standing.31

A second, and rather different, point that emerges from this examination of the place Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani occupied in Ahmad Riza’s thought, it seems to me, is that Ahmad Riza saw the Shaikh as uniting within himself both shari‘at and tariqat, both the Law and the Path. Although this point does not emerge as clearly from the literature—which, by its very nature, stresses the tariqat aspect of belief and practice over shari‘at, and a more complete documentation of which would require us to examine ‘Abd ul-Qadir’s teachings as they emerge from his own writings—nevertheless, the history of the Qadiri order in the subcontinent indicates that ‘reformist’ or shari‘a-minded Sufis have been an important element in the order. Belief in the miraculous, or in the inborn superiority of noble (Sayyid) descent, in no way contradicts emphasis on a ‘sober’ Sufism.32 The evidence from Ahmad Riza’s own life, his sayings as recorded in his Malfūzāt, and his writings, together with what we know of the nature of the ritual activities he participated in, all indicate (as noted previously) that esoteric beliefs and practices had to be within the bounds of the shari‘a, or, as Muslims would say, ba-shar‘ (‘with’ shari‘a).

IV

Ahmad Riza as a ‘lover of the Prophet’

In the foregoing we have seen how the Prophet was the focal point and apex of religious and spiritual authority for Ahmad Riza, the goal to which devotion to pīr and shaiikh lead. For him all such forms of devotion are undertaken ultimately in order to reach Allah. His writings on the Prophet are extensive: Numerous fatāwā deal with the Prophet’s attributes, as do his diwān of na‘t poetry and his Malfūzāt. In the discussion that follows, I intend to highlight the main themes addressed by Ahmad Riza’s poetry and Malfūzāt insofar as they concern the Prophet.

Veneration of the Prophet has a long history in Sufi and popular devotionalism. It goes back to al-Hallaj (d. 922), Sana‘i (d. 1131), Ibn al-‘Arabi

31 Bihari (1938: 201). Zafar ud-Din recounts an incident in Ahmad Riza’s household when it was discovered that one of the household servants was a Sayyid. Ahmad Riza immediately ordered everyone in the house to serve him instead, to consider the salary he had been receiving as nazār (a gift), and to ensure that he was fed and cared for. After a while the man left of his own accord, made uncomfortable, undoubtedly, by the reversal of roles.

32 Evidence for the ‘reformist’ or shari‘a-minded orientation of the Qadiris in the subcontinent may be found, for example, in Eaton (1978: 284–86). Rizvi (1983: Vol. 2, 91–94) also indicates that some famous Qadiri Sufis such as Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Haqq Dehlawi (d. 1642) were devoted to uniting shari‘at and tariqat.
(d. 1240), and Rumi (d. 1273) among others. Ahmad Riza’s *Malfüzât* indicate his familiarity with the lives and writings of a range of Sufis, such as Junaid Baghdadi (d. 910) the Persian poet Rumi, the Egyptian poet al-Busiri (d. 1298) who wrote the *Burda* in praise of the Prophet, and the Egyptian ‘Abd al-Wahhab Sha‘rani (d. 1565), for example (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 1, 43, 92–93; Vol. 2, 59–60; Vol. 3, 29). Given his vast erudition, it is likely that his vision of the Prophet and of the latter’s place in the life of the believer was shaped by this rich Sufi tradition of veneration of the Prophet. Schimmel points as well to the popularity of *na‘t* poetry in the subcontinent since the Mughal period, written first in Persian and later in Urdu and in regional languages such as Sindhi (1987: 207–13). Some of this poetry would have been familiar to Ahmad Riza.

The resemblance in the themes touched upon in the devotional poetry of the Muslim world generally, and those that Ahmad Riza writes about, indicates that he was, indeed, writing within the context of this larger tradition. Schimmel describes the poets’ concerns as follows:

> From earliest times, Muhammad, the messenger of God, had been the ideal for the faithful Muslim. His behaviour, his acts, and his words served as models for the pious, who tried to imitate him as closely as possible even in the smallest details of outward life . . . . All the noble qualities of his body and his soul were described in terms of marked admiration (1975: 213–14).

Schimmel places the beginning of a ‘genuine Muhammad mysticism’ in the early 8th century AD, with the first formulation of the ‘Nur-e Muhammadi’ concept that Muhammad was created from God’s light and preceded the creation of the world and of Adam. In the 10th century Hallaj took the idea a step further, writing that the Prophet is both the ‘cause and goal of creation’. Proof of this belief was cited from the *hadīs qudsī*, ‘If thou hadst not been, I would not have created the heavens.’ In subsequent centuries the concept of the ‘Muhammadan light’ was further developed until the theory of *fanā fi‘l-rasul*, ‘annihilation in the Prophet’, emerged in later Sufism. The Prophet had by now definitely become an intermediary between man and God (Schimmel 1975: 215–16).

Ahmad Riza’s writings, whether in his capacity as a *muftī* writing *fatāwā*, as a Sufi preceptor giving guidance to his followers in his *Malfüzât*, or as a poet expressing his personal longings and passions, all indicate that he held views such as those described by Schimmel. One of his ideas about the Prophet which is worth exploring here is that of the relationship between

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34 On the Divine Saying, see Graham (1977).
Allah and the Prophet, for clarification on this point will help us understand one of the major areas of difference between Ahmad Riza and his followers on the one side, and other South Asian Muslims such as the Deobandis on the other. Ahmad Riza’s own relationship of ‘love’ for the Prophet should consequently also become clearer.

In his *Malfuzāt*, Ahmad Riza responded to a query about the Prophet’s intercession with Allah as follows:

> Only the Prophet can reach God without intermediaries. This is why, on the Day of the Resurrection, all the prophets, *auliyā* and ‘ulamā will gather in the Prophet’s presence and beg him to intercede for them with God . . . . The Prophet cannot have an intermediary because he is perfect [kāmil]. Perfection is concomitant on [Mutafara’] existence [wujūd]; and the existence of the world is dependent upon the existence of the Prophet [which in turn is dependent on the existence of God]. In short, faith in the preeminence of the Prophet leads one to believe that only Allah has existence, everything else is his shadow (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 2, 58).

The hierarchy, then, is clear: Allah, the Prophet, the other prophets, the saints, and so on. Within this framework of the Prophet’s essentially dependent relationship to Allah, however, there are no limits to the qualities that may be ascribed to him. Ahmad Riza quotes ‘Abd ul-Haqq Muhaddis Dehlawi, and the Egyptian poet al-Busiri, in support of his view that,

> setting aside the claim that Christians make [about Jesus being divine], you can say whatever you wish in praise of the Prophet for there was no limit to the Prophet’s qualities (ibid.: 58–59).

This belief in the practically limitless virtues and abilities of the Prophet, given him by God of His own will, is the basis for Ahmad Riza’s assertion that the Prophet had knowledge of the unseen (‘ilm-e ghaib), a claim denied by the Deobandis. This knowledge was said by Ahmad Riza to include (though by no means to be limited to) the five things specifically said in the Qur’an to be known to God.35

In certain respects, the Allah/Prophet relationship is not as clear as the foregoing quotations would suggest, however. In the following passage

35 The kernel of Ahmad Riza’s argument with the Deobandis on the ‘ilm-e ghaib issue was that ‘known to God’ did not mean *only* known to Him, and not known to the Prophet. Ahmad Riza believed that Allah gifted such knowledge to the Prophet from time to time, including knowledge of the five things specifically mentioned in the Qur’an (31: 34). These were: knowledge of the Hour (of Resurrection), of when it would rain, of the sex of a child in the womb, of what a person would earn on the morrow, and of where one would die.
from the Mafuzat, Ahmad Riza made the point that the Prophet is not ‘other than God’ (ghair-e khuda):

[The Prophet had to teach his followers how to recite the Qur’an in the early days of Islam.] After listening to the recitation of a sahabi, Abu Musa Ash’ari, at night [from his own house], he praised his reading the next morning. The sahabi said, O Prophet, had I known that you were listening, I would have read with even greater fervor (aur zyada banan kar parhau). . . . [Ahmad Riza comments] The sahabi himself said he would have recited more forcefully for the Prophet, and the Prophet did not object. This proves that reading for the Prophet was not comparable to reading for one other than God (ghair-e khuda). The Prophet’s business (mu‘amala) is Allah’s business (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 2, 44-45).

Ahmad Riza also gave other examples of the identification of the Prophet and Allah, such as A’isha’s (d. 678) statement that she was repenting to Allah and the Prophet.

On another occasion, Ahmad Riza was asked whether it was permissible to use lanterns and carpets (and similar expensive decorative items) at a milad function. He responded that it was permissible as long as the purpose of the decoration was to honour the Prophet, rather than some selfish or wordly motive, and reported this story:

Imam Ghazali wrote in his Ihya ‘al-‘Ulum, on the basis of a writing by Sayyid Abu ‘Ali Rudbari, that a believer had organised a zikr meeting [remembrance of the Prophet’s name]. He had installed a thousand lights in the meeting hall. A guest arrived, and seeing the lights, began to leave [in disapproval of the host’s extravagance]. The organizer of the function held him back, took him inside, and said, Any light that has been lit for one other than God should be put out. The man tried to do so, but none of the lights could be extinguished (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 1, 99).36

These quotations are rather startling at first in their apparent equation of the Prophet with God. We know, however, from numerous clearly stated passages in Ahmad Riza’s works that he did not equate the Prophet with God. What we have here, I think, is evidence of Ahmad Riza’s unusually strong sense of Muhammad’s prophecy itself, in terms of the uniquely close relationship to God that this implied. I am helped in my attempt to understand this by William Graham, who, in his study of the hadis qudsi or Divine Saying, writes:

36 Rudbari (d. 934) was a contemporary of Junaid Baghdadi. See Schimmel (1975: 54).
In the Divine Saying one sees perhaps most clearly that aspect of Muhammad's mission that is most often ignored: his genuinely prophetic function as the ordinary man who is transformed by his 'calling' to 'rise and warn'—not only through his 'Book', but in all his words and acts . . . . Outside the scriptural Revelation, God's revealing goes on, and most vividly so in the action and speech of His messenger. In terms of religious authority, especially within the realm of personal faith and personal piety, the Qur'an and the varied materials in the Hadith form not two separate homogeneous bodies of material, but one continuum of religious truth that encompasses a heterogeneous array of materials (1977: 110). 37

Ahmad Riza, like the early Muslim community that Graham describes in his study, appears not to have made any distinction between Muhammad the Prophet, recipient and messenger of God's immutable word, and Muhammad the guide or leader, an ordinary mortal like those around him. For him, the Prophet was 'in all his words and acts' prophetic, and thus extrahuman. While all believing Muslims see Muhammad as unique among humans in perhaps indefinable ways, by virtue of his calling, Ahmad Riza seems to have had a heightened awareness of Muhammad's 'genuinely prophetic function', causing him to place the Prophet at the centre of his own life as a believer.

As may be expected, these ideas are expressed particularly forcefully in his poetry. In the following verses, the subject is Muhammad's close relationship with Allah:

The two worlds seek to please Allah
God seeks to please Muhammad
(khuda ki rizā chahte hain do ʿālam
khuda chāhta hai rizā-e muhammad)
Muhammad is the threshold to Allah
Allah is the threshold to Muhammad
(muhammad bara-e janāb-e ilāhi
janāb-e ilāhi bara-e muhammad)
A vow was made for all time
to unite Khuda's happiness with Muhammad's
(baham ʿahd bandhe hain wasl-e abad kā
rizā-e khuda aur rizā-e muhammad)
(Ahmad Riza Khan 1976 edn.: 47)

37 Graham argues that the very existence of the hadīs qudsī, which is a record of a Divine Saying in the Prophet's words, and which thus straddles the boundaries of Qur'an and hadīs, should alert us against making a rigid distinction between the Prophet in his prophetic role and in his personal role. Graham finds evidence to believe that the earliest Muslims did not do so.
In the following verse Muhammad is seen as Allah’s beloved, completely united with Him:

I will call you only ‘Lord’, you who are the beloved of the Lord
there is no ‘yours’ and ‘mine’ between the beloved and the lover
(main to mālik hi kahunga kih ho mālik ke habib
ýāni mahbūb o muhibb men nahin merā terā)
(Ahmad Riza Khan, 1976 edn.: 9)

On the Prophet’s night ascension (mi‘rāj), he became God’s bridegroom:
You went as a bridegroom of light
on your head a chaplet of light,
wedding clothes of light on your body
(kya banā nām-e khūda asra kā dūḥā nūr kā
sar pe sihrah nūr kā, bar men shahānā nūr kā)
(Ahmad Riza Khan, 1976 edn.: 13)

As for his own relationship to the Prophet, Ahmad Riza made it a conscious object of his life to immerse himself in serving the Prophet in whatever capacity he could. Small details about him say this most eloquently: He used to sign himself as ‘Abd ul-Mustafa (‘Servant of Mustafa’, this meaning ‘the Chosen’ or ‘the Elect’, being one of Muhammad’s names) on all correspondence, fatāwā, and other writings. When asked about this at one of his daily meetings, he replied that the name was the sign of good judgment (husn-e zann) in a Muslim, and cited a hadīs in which ‘Umar was reported to have said that he considered himself to be the Prophet’s follower (bandā) and servant (khādim) (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 1, 43). On another occasion, he told those gathered about him that if his heart were to be broken into two pieces, it would be found that on one part would be inscribed the first part of the kalimā, ‘There is no God but Allah’, and on the other would be written the second half, ‘And Muhammad is His Prophet’ (ibid.: Vol. 3, 67).38

As was the case with Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani whom Ahmad Riza perceived as actively intervening on his behalf from time to time, so too did he experience the Prophet’s presence in a very personal way in his life. When he was learning the art of divination (ilm-e jafir), the Prophet appeared to him in a dream giving him permission (izn) to proceed with his study.39 On his second hajj in 1905–06, he spent a month at Medina, the

38 A lengthy poem on the mi‘rāj adjudged (in a personal communication) to be Ahmad Riza’s ‘masterpiece’ by Professor Muhammad Mas’ud Ahmad, a scholar on Ahmad Riza and his work, again pictures the Prophet’s ascension as a wedding. See Hadā’iq-e Bakshish (n.d.): Part 1, 106–15. The imagery of a wedding is also central to the notion of urs, for the word urs literally means ‘marriage’.

39 However, he gave it up of his own accord after some time. Mustafa Riza Khan (n.d.): Vol. 1, 82–83
Prophet’s birthplace, being present there during the Prophet’s birth anniversary celebrations on 12 Rabī‘ ul-Awwal. He spent this entire period, he said, at the Prophet’s tomb, taking time off only once to visit the shrine of one Maulana Daghestani, and another time to go to (ziyārat) the tomb of Hamza, the Prophet’s uncle. When he met the ‘ulamā of Medina to engage in learned discussions, it was in the precincts of the Prophet’s tomb (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 2, 34–35). This was, for Ahmad Riza, the holiest place on earth; he was willing to go so far, indeed, as to say that Medina was better than Mecca, as in this verse:

O pilgrims! come to the tomb of the king of kings you have seen the Ka‘ba, now see the Ka‘ba of the Ka‘ba (hājiyo! ā’o shahinshāh kā rauzā dekhō ka‘ba dekh chuke ka‘be ka ka‘ba dekho)\(^{40}\)

In his belief, the Prophet is very much alive in his tomb, leading ‘a life of sense and feeling’, as do the other prophets. From his grave he helps his ‘guests’, those who visit his tomb, in whatever way he sees fit (Mustafa Riza Khan, n.d.: Vol. 3, 28–30).

It was particularly in the hope of being honoured with a vision of the Prophet at his tomb in Medina, Zafar ud-Din Bihari writes, that Ahmad Riza had undertaken this second hajj. While waiting for him to appear, Ahmad Riza spent the first night composing a ghazal; the next night he presented the ghazal to the Prophet, and it was after this that ‘his qismat [fortune] awoke. His watchful, vigilant eyes were blessed with the presence of the Prophet’ (Bihari 1938: 43–44). Unfortunately, Ahmad Riza himself does not appear to have written about this experience.\(^{41}\)

Ahmad Riza’s personal devotion to the Prophet shines through in his poetry. Some poems have become popular nationwide in Pakistan and are recited particularly on the Prophet’s birth anniversary. The simplicity, humility in the presence of the awesomeness of the Prophet, and grateful confidence in his forgiveness with which Ahmad Riza addresses the Prophet, are apparent over and over again, as in these verses from the extremely popular poem Karoron dūrūd:

I am tired, you are my sanctuary I am bound, you are my refuge My future is in your hands. Upon you be thousands of blessings (khaštah hūn aur tum ma’az bastā hūn aur tum malāz āge jo shai ki rizā, tum pe karoron dūrūd)


\(^{41}\) His lengthy ghazal is in Haddī‘iq-e Bakhshīsh (n.d.), Part 1: 92–105. I have been unable to find any reference in it to his vision of the Prophet, though this is not surprising given Zafar ud-Din Bihari’s information that it was written before he had this experience.
My sins are limitless,  
but you are forgiving and merciful  
Forgive me my faults and offences.  
Upon you be thousands of blessings  
(garche hain behad qasūr, tum ho ‘afā′-e ghafūr  
bakhsh do jurm o khatā tum pe karoron dūrūd)  
(Ahmad Riza Khan, 1976 edn.: 195)42

It was entirely consistent with Ahmad Riza’s personal piety and devotion to the Prophet that the latter’s birth anniversary on 12 Rabi’ ul-Awwal, known as milād un-nabī (or maulid, both forms being derivatives of the Arabic root walada, to give birth), was celebrated on a grand scale. It was a time of rejoicing, eagerly anticipated by Ahmad Riza and his followers. The Dabdaba-e Sikandari reported in January 1916, for example, that on the Prophet’s birthday ‘the Muslims of Bareilly, Rampur, Pilibhit, Shahjahanpur and other towns performed the pilgrimage to A‘la Hazrat [Ahmad Riza]’, for this was one of the three annual occasions on which he consented to give a sermon (Dabdaba-e Sikandari, 52: 11 [24 January 1916], 3). In fact, it appears from Zafar ud-Din Bihari’s account that he gave two sermons that day, one at 8 AM after the first (fajr) prayer, and the second in the evening after the last (‘isha’) prayer. The sermons were delivered at his ancestral house (referred to as ‘Purani Haweli’, or ‘Old Family Home’), in which his younger brother Hasan Riza lived. In addition to the ‘ulamā’ who came from outside Bareilly, the elite of the city were also invited to attend. People considered it so important to listen to Ahmad Riza on this day, Zafar ud-Din writes, that no one of eminence in the town organised a similar gathering of the town’s own at the same time.43

Preparations for the event began around dawn. The townspeople—Ahmad Riza’s murids, followers and admirers—bathed, donned their new clothes, and hurried to the mosque to greet him there at the time of the fajr prayer. After the obligatory prayers (fariza) had been offered, people lined up waiting for him to finish saying his prayers and hoped to get close enough to him to kiss his hand (dast-bosi).

Shortly thereafter, and again at night at the ‘Purani Haweli’,44 began the

42 Although Ahmad Riza did not approve of music and would not have put his verses to music, this poem, as many others he wrote, has a lilt and rhythm that makes it easy to remember and recite.

43 Bihari (1938: 96–97). Zafar ud-Din does not tell us to which year his account refers, though I assume the proceedings were more or less standard from year to year.

44 The text of the Hayaat-e A’la Hazrat is confusing here. Zafar ud-Din clearly refers to the fajr prayer and the dast-bosi (kissing of the hand) taking place in a mosque, and is also unambiguous in reporting that the sermons were delivered at the Purani Haweli. However, he then goes on to talk of the na’t reciter, and Ahmad Riza, getting up on the minbar (pulpit) to
recitation of na't poetry by a trained reciter (na't khwān), recalling the Prophet’s qualities. Ahmad Riza ascended the minbar (pulpit) exactly at the moment of qiyyām (literally, ‘to stay, to stand’) when everyone in the meeting (majlis) stood up at the remembrance of the Prophet’s birth (zikr-e wilādat). Ahmad Riza stood in silence for several minutes, for his entrance had caused a tumult among the crowd, which was swelling in numbers and finding it hard to fit into the meeting hall. When the shoving and pushing had quieted down, he rinsed his mouth with water using a spittoon placed next to him, and began his sermon with the words ‘Bism’Il-
lah ar-rahmān ar-rahīm’.

In his sermon Ahmad Riza said that Allah, who is intrinsic (zāt), chose the Prophet as His means of bringing the extrinsic (ghair) world to Him. Everything comes from Allah, and Muhammad distributes what He gives. What is in the one is in the other. The other prophets are a reflection or shadow of Muhammad, like stars reflected on water.

Allah made Muhammad from His light before he made anything else. Everything begins with the Prophet, even existence (wujūd). He was the first prophet, as Allah made him before He made anything else; and he was the last as well, being the final prophet. Being the first light, the sun and all light originates from the Prophet. All the atoms, stones, trees and birds recognised Muhammad as Prophet, as did Gabriel, and the other prophets.

The majlis-e milād is held in order to recall God’s blessings (ne’mat), and to bring Muslims together so as to remember the presence (tashrif-āwari) and excellent qualities of the Prophet. The collective partaking of food (which follows at the end of a milād meeting), Ahmad Riza said, is not central to the milād’s purpose; nor, however, is there any harm in it, for it is an invitation of people ‘for a good purpose’ (dā’wat ala’l-khair), and is therefore necessarily good.45 Allah has said, ‘. . . the bounty of thy Lord rehearse and proclaim!’ (93: 11) (Yusuf Ali 1983: 1753).

Ahmad Riza reminded his audience that Allah had brought all the prophets together and told them about the future prophethood of Muhammad. All, on Allah’s command, bound themselves to believe in his prophecy, and were witness to the fact that the others did so. Thus Allah was the first to speak of the Prophet, and the first majlis to mention the Prophet was this meeting of the prophets. In keeping with this covenant, all the prophets from Adam to Jesus have remembered the Prophet’s coming and

 speak, which suggests that the meetings followed directly after the prayers (fajr and ‘isha’) at the mosque itself, and that there was no change of venue. He also refers to the people crowding together at the mosque to do the dast-bosı and then getting as close to the minbar as possible. This doesn’t sound like a ‘by invitation only’ affair. See Bihari (1938: 96–98) for the entire text concerning the milād meeting (majlis-e milād).

45 Bihari (1938: 108). Here he was defending his position on the legitimacy of holding milād functions against critics such as the Deobandis. See Metcalf (1982: 300–301).
his birth. Speaking about the circumstances of the birth itself, he recalled its joyous celebration by the angels and the fear with which the event was viewed by the devils (shayātīn). The meeting ended with a na‘t calling down Allah’s blessings (dārūd) on the Prophet.

The practice of holding milād meetings, like that of celebrating the ‘urs of a Sufi shaikh or pīr, reading the Fatiha in thanksgiving over an offering of food, or holding giyārhwīn functions in honour of ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani, were matters of intense debate and argument among the ‘ulamā at the turn of the 19th century. The Deobandi ‘ulamā sought ‘to avoid fixed holidays like the maulūd of the Prophet, the ‘urs of the saints’ (Metcalf 1982: 151) and other feasts; the Ahl-e Hadis, taking an even more disapproving attitude,

prohibited ‘urs and qawwālī, particularly opposing the giyārhwīn of Shaikh ‘Abdu'l-Qadir Gilani . . . . They prohibited all pilgrimage, even that to the grave of the Prophet at Medina . . . . In their emphasis on sweeping reform, they understood sufism itself, not just its excesses, to be a danger to true religion (Metcalf 1982: 273–74).

Like the Deobandis, they too opposed the practice of milād.

In the 1890s, Imdad Ullah Muhajir Makki (1817–1899) had addressed the controversy on this matter in his pamphlet Faisla-e haft Mas'ala. In his view, whether a milād was permissible (jā'iz) or not depended on the intention of the participants. If a person equated the details of the milād (such as holding it on a particular date and no other, distributing sweets, lighting incense sticks, or laying carpets) with ibādat or worship, at par with namāz and the Ramazan fast (rozā), then it was reprehensible. It was bid'at (reprehensible innovation) if a person considered it a religious obligation (dini farz), a duty enjoined by the shari'a. But as long as it was viewed as one among several means of honouring and remembering the Prophet, it was permissible.

Apart from the controversy over the permissibility of holding a milād, however, debate also centred over a particular aspect of the milād function itself, namely the practice of standing up (qiyām) during a sermon when the Prophet’s birth was recalled, and blessings were called down on him (salāt o salām). Ahmad Riza; answering a query about the permissibility of

46 Bihari (1938: 112). Gabriel calmed the fears of Amina, Muhammad’s mother, and assumed the shape of a white hen when urging the Prophet to manifest himself. Again the image of a marriage comes up when Gabriel tells Muhammad (not yet born) that the procession (barūd) of the bridegroom of both worlds is fully adorned and ready (to start for the bride’s house. The Prophet, as bridegroom, is awaited before it can set out.) It would appear that in this case the bride is the world rather than Allah.

47 Barkati (1986: 50–76). In the above I have attempted to sum up his position rather than lay it out in all its details.
qiṣāṣ in an 1881–82 fatwa entitled Iqāmat ul-Qiyāma, responded by saying that the practice was viewed as commendable (mustahsan) by a majority of ‘ulamā throughout the Islamic world—particularly mentioning leading ‘ulamā in Mecca and Medina—for two reasons. The first was that it had been practised for hundreds of years, though admittedly not in the first three generations of Islam. 48 Ahmad Riza considered this a valid argument on the basis of the hadis that what Muslims consider to be good is good in Allah’s sight too, and that a practice which hundreds of ‘ulamā have considered to be good over hundreds of years cannot be bad (Ahmad Riza Khan 1986: 25–26, 28–29). Second, standing up when the Prophet’s birth is recalled, Ahmad Riza argued, was an expression of respect and honour (tā‘zīm) for him (ibid.: 36.) Standing up as a mark of respect for the Prophet, was, for these reasons, a meritorious act that would earn great reward (sawāb) (ibid.: 15–22). Ahmad Riza did not assert, as Metcalf writes, that the Prophet was actually present (though invisible to the audience) at the time of qiṣāṣ, 50 though he cited with obvious approval and concurrence a statement by a Hanbali mufti that the Prophet’s spirit is present at this time (Ahmad Riza Khan 1986: 23).

V

The importance of intercession in the exercise of spiritual authority

This paper has highlighted the importance for Ahmad Riza of intercession on behalf of the believer with God, a role fulfilled most especially by the pir, the shaikh, and the Prophet, though not limited to them. As Metcalf points out, the power of mediation is accessible to many: ‘Not only the dead but the living could be intermediaries’, including children (1982: 303). However, the intervention or mediation of certain categories of persons is more powerful than that of others. That of the Prophet is best of all.

Ahmad Riza believed that mediatory power (or grace, baraka) inhere most especially in lineal descendants of the Prophet; hence his marked respect for all Sayyids, regardless of social standing. This was probably a significant factor, as well, in his (and his father’s) choice of Shah

48 This was an important admission, in terms of the argument, for it meant that the practice was an ‘innovation’ or bid‘at. However, as Ahmad Riza argued at some length in this fatwa, it was a bid‘at-e hasana or ‘good innovation’. The argument was taken even further, and the tables turned on the opponents of the practice, when Ahmad Riza quoted an ‘ālim from the Haramain (Mecca and Medina) as saying that because Muslims saw this as a good deed, those who opposed it were bid‘atis! Ahmad Riza Khan (1986: 28–29).

49 Ahmad Riza offered detailed proof on both counts, arguing his point of view in about thirty-odd pages. The second half of the fatwā was specifically in rebuttal of Maulana Nazir Husain Dehlawi (d. 1902), the Ahl-e Hadis leader.

50 See Metcalf (1982: 301). Ahmad Riza did assert in another context, however, that the Prophet had the ability to be bodily present should he so desire.
Al-e Rasul of Marahra, who was a Sayyid, as his pîr. It also accounts in part for his devotion to Shaikh ‘Abd ul-Qadir Jilani.

As Ahmad Riza’s care in observing birth or death anniversaries such as ‘urs, gyârhwîn and milâd indicates, he believed strongly that the dead continued ‘to live’ in a spiritual sense, and that they retained a specially close relationship with places they had been associated with during their lives. Moreover, their spirits were specially alert and their grace heightened on certain days (their birth or death anniversaries). For these reasons, supplicants were well-advised to observe such anniversaries, and exhibit the greatest respect for tombs. Such behaviour, pleasing to the shaikh or pîr whose intercession was sought, would find favour with him, and therefore be a source of benefit (sawâb) to the believer.

While having a pîr, or visiting the tombs of Sufi holy men and ‘ulamâ in far-flung places were not at par with the performance of obligatory ritual acts such as prayer or fasting, or substitutes for them, in Ahmad Riza’s eyes they could only be a source of good and an aid for the believer. As he said in his fatwa in answer to the question as to why one needed a pîr, it was absurd to imagine that one could reach Allah without an intermediary. One senses in all his writings and in his Malfâzât the humility of one who believed he needed help in getting access to Allah, and in working out his own salvation. He saw the position taken by the Ahl-e Hadis, or ‘Wahhabis’, as he called them, rejecting the need for intermediaries, as a sign of their arrogance.

As for the Prophet, his status was so elevated, and his closeness to Allah so great, that for Ahmad Riza the Prophet had in a sense displaced Allah as the centre of his devotions. While Ahmad Riza’s writings make clear that the Prophet’s qualities and abilities were God-given, and thus contingent, while only God is intrinsic, the fact of prophecy itself had such compelling force in Ahmad Riza’s judgment that he viewed love of the Prophet as the best way of showing love of Allah. In all he did or wrote about, love of the Prophet was a motivating factor.

In fact, it was a standard Ahmad Riza consistently applied in drawing boundaries between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ action, and in distinguishing between Muslims who were on the right or wrong track. In my view it would be erroneous to conclude that because Ahmad Riza supported a mediatory, custom-laden ‘Islam’, he ‘made less of a demand for individual responsibility’ on himself or his followers than did the Deobandis or others (Metcalfe 1982: 397). On the contrary, his whole life was spent defining how a Muslim should conduct him or herself in his or her time and day, and in punctiliously following these standards of conduct and belief in his own life, while at the same time distancing himself from those Muslims of whose beliefs or practice he disapproved. I have also tried to show that he attached great importance to the intention with which an action was undertaken. What emerges, I think, is the distinctiveness of his ‘style’,
compared with that of other Indian Muslims in the 19th and 20th centuries, caused by the determining role in his life of the Prophet and of his defence of the Prophet against perceived disrespect or slight.

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